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SUBJECT: KRG BOUNDARIES STILL CONTENTIOUS ON EVE OF UNAMI'S FIRST RECOMMENDATIONS

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Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Greg D'Elia for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Special Advisor for Northern Iraq Tom Krajeski in early May visited Kirkuk, Mosul, and Erbil to discuss the status of Kirkuk and other disputed internal boundaries in the run-up to the first United Nations Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) recommendations on resolving KRG boundaries.

Ambassador Krajeski met with Kurdish, Arab, Turkman, and Christian leaders in Kirkuk city, Christian and Shabak minority leaders in the disputed Hamdaniya district of Ninewa province, and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) officials in Erbil. Positions on all sides remain hardest over Kirkuk; the Kurds offer compromises on timing and the makeup of local government but demand the city join the KRG, while the Arabs and Turkmans lobby for &special status8 outside KRG control. The minorities in Hamdaniya - one of the four territories UNAMI designated for early resolution - are similarly divided, with some Shia Shabak opposing KRG membership due to local Kurdish excesses, and some Christians hoping for KRG blessing to form an autonomous region of their own. End summary.

Kurds: No Compromise On Annexing Kirkuk City

¶2. (C) Kirkuk remains the greatest challenge. At the national level, Kurdish leaders are offering what they consider compromises to ensure Kirkuk city's entry into the KRG, including accepting the principle of shared administration among the city's ethnic groups and the idea of splitting the province so that some districts remain outside KRG boundaries. Neither offer is new, and some hardline KRG leaders continue to reject even these, but they represent at least a stated willingness among KRG policymakers to embrace pragmatism to soften opposition to KRG annexation.

¶3. (C) A newer, and perhaps a more significant, compromise is a greater willingness to wait. In February, KRG President Massoud Barzani vehemently maintained that Kirkuk must be resolved by July 1, the end of the six-month extension that UNAMI leader Staffan de Mistura negotiated last December. Only a few months later, Kurdish leaders at all levels acknowledge - in both public and private - the difficulty and inevitable sluggishness of resolving such contentious issues. They now demand only demonstrable signs of forward motion during the six-month extension, so that they can show their population the process is yielding results.

¶4. (C) Local Kurdish leaders show little of the same flexibility. Rizgar Ali, Kirkuk Provincial Council Chairman and probably the province's most influential leader due to his high-level connections in the PUK, noted that the Kurds have little reason to compromise with Arabs or Turkmans) Kurds dominate the executive posts, provincial council,

ministries, and security forces, and time is on their side. This stranglehold on municipal and provincial power does little to secure Kirkuk's annexation into the KRG, but much to render the area a Kurdish fiefdom in the meantime. Indeed, Rizgar Ali is not the only local Kurdish leader whose hardline actions probably exceed KRG policy and alienate non-Kurdish communities in disputed territories.

Arabs and Turkmans Cling To &Special Status8

¶ 15. (C) Arab and Turkman interlocutors, however, continue to insist on a &special status8 for Kirkuk outside the KRG. Few have defined exactly what this means, but most highlight the recent agreement between the Kurdish and Arab blocs on dividing Kirkuk's government posts) 32% each for Kurds, Arabs, and Turkman, and 4% for Christians) and a degree of provincial autonomy exceeding that of a normal Iraqi province but short of that of a formal region (since the local Kurdish majority probably would block a constitutional effort to incorporate Kirkuk as its own region). Muhammad Khalil, Deputy Chair of the Kirkuk province Article 140 Committee and a Sunni Arab, emphasized the need to decentralize authority from Baghdad, but offered few specifics. The KRG, predictably, continues to reject the &special status8 proposal) Masrur Barzani, KRG intelligence chief and son of the KRG President, declared special status outside the KRG a reasonable idea in theory but one that contradicts the will of the Kurdish majority.

¶ 16. (C) Another common Arab and Turkmen refrain is that the U.S. is responsible for resolving the issue, implicitly by imposing a final status outside the KRG. Kirkuk Deputy Governor Rakan al-Juburi (a Sunni Arab) said the U.S. has misplayed the Kirkuk situation since 2003, such that the

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population believes Washington supports only the Kurds. Another Sunni leader, Abu Saddam, acknowledged the problems with the U.S. imposing such solutions, but still called on Washington to expel recent Kurdish settlers or find a way to resolve Kirkuk without their participation. The Arabs and Turkmen probably realize that calling on the U.S. to dictate terms is unrealistic, but the demand reflects their ongoing distrust of the UN, fear of losing a referendum, and recognition they are fighting an uphill battle to remain outside the KRG.

¶ 17. (C) Opposition to joining the KRG is strongest in Hawija, the Sunni Arab-dominated district in western Kirkuk province. Abu Saddam, probably the district's most powerful tribal leader, said Hawija is a historical and inseparable part of Kirkuk province, the province could not join the KRG, and his many tribesmen would take to the streets if either happened. The KRG for its part disavowed any claim to Hawija years ago and we have doubts that Hawijans feel such allegiance to their province, per se, but both Abu Saddam's threat to mobilize and the broader risk of violence out of Hawija remain very real.

Iraqi Turkman Front Fragmenting, Alienating Kurds

¶ 18. (C) The Turkmans are struggling with a leadership crisis, and their voice in Kirkuk appears to be weakening. The Iraqi Turkman Front (ITF) is both the strongest and most hardline Turkman party, by many accounts entirely on the strength of generous funding from Ankara. It controls nine seats on the Kirkuk Provincial Council, which it has withheld in an 18-month-long boycott. One of these nine returned last week to the PC, and five others planned to do so until the intervention by Ali Mahdi, the ITF's predominant figure; it may, however, be too late to do much good. The ITF has so alienated the Kurdish leadership that even moderate KRG leaders in Erbil have little appetite to work with them, and write the Front off as a mouthpiece for Ankara in any event.

Time, however, is not on the Turkman side; their numbers in Kirkuk are far less than they claim, by some estimates less than 20 percent, and the community lacks any apparent military capacity.

¶9. (C) Kurdish officials in both Kirkuk and Erbil decry the ITF's relationship with Ankara, although the ITF's obstinacy probably is a greater irritant. Kurdish officials seem to perceive the Ankara-ITF relationship is weakening) Kirkuk Governor Abdul-Rahman Mustafa said Turkish influence is becoming less obvious in his province, Masrur Barzani said control of the ITF portfolio auspiciously is shifting from Turkish military to civilian intelligence, and Nechirvan Barzani assessed that Turkey ultimately will not intervene seriously in Kirkuk. All three, however, dismissed the ITF as Ankara's puppet, which neither enjoys popular Turkman support nor merits engagement as a legitimate Kirkuki political force. The Kurds to some extent are framing their parochial interest in Kirkuk as a matter of Iraqi sovereignty, but Ankara can indeed help the situation by remaining as far as possible from a political party) the ITF - which does its constituency more harm than good.

Referendum Equated With KRG Accession

¶10. (C) All communities treat the idea of a referendum as a de facto agreement to join the KRG. Kurds often call for &quick implementation of Article 1408 or &resolving Kirkuk according to the constitution," both essentially euphemisms for scheduling a referendum they know the KRG will win. This implicit confidence in the outcome of a referendum stems by turns from the Kurds' demographic edge, superior organization, and potential ability to stack a close vote. PC Chairman Rizgar Ali, a PUK insider and hardline supporter of KRG accession, counters concerns a plebiscite would destabilize the province by noting that the three nationwide votes since 2003 caused only minimal violence in Kirkuk.

¶11. (C) The Arabs and Turkman, for their part, call a referendum unworkable because of the large number of Kurds) Abu Saddam and others claimed between 600,000 and 700,000, many with no previous roots in Kirkuk) they claim have arrived in Kirkuk since 2003. (Indeed, UN officials in Erbil noted a disturbing spike in the voter rolls in Kirkuk.) Some Arabs and Turkman say a vote can happen if these people leave or in some way cede voting rights, but ultimately treat the idea of a referendum with extreme suspicion because of the overwhelming resources they anticipate the KRG would put into winning. The exception are Kirkuki Christians) a delegation of them expressed casual support for a referendum as a just and democratic

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solution, but otherwise supported any peaceful outcome.

Shia Shabak Renounce KRG Over Local Kurd Excesses

¶12. (C) The Hamdaniya district of Ninewa province, one of the first four territories UNAMI has slated for resolution, is a prime example of an area initially attracted to the KRG for its superior services and security, but now partially alienated due to perceived abuses by local Kurdish leaders and Peshmerga security forces. Nechirvan Barzani acknowledged that Kurdish leaders here and elsewhere may be alienating non-Kurds in many of the disputed territories. Some leaders of the Shabak, concentrated in Hamdaniya alongside Christians complain of discrimination and strong-arm tactics by district and provincial Kurdish leaders, including diverting water and resettling Kurds on others' traditional lands. The Shabak leaders with whom we met, who are members of the Ninewa Provincial Council affiliated with the the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and among the only Shabak with significant political

clout, now fervently oppose KRG accession. In contrast to opponents of KRG accession in Kirkuk, these Shabak leaders do not oppose a referendum, probably in the confidence that Hamdaniya voters would choose Ninewa province over the KRG.

Christians Seek Autonomous Region Of Their Own

¶13. (C) Christians in Hamdaniya are comparatively agnostic on whether to join the KRG) at least some of them advocate an autonomous Christian region on the border of the KRG and Ninewa, whether under the GOI or KRG umbrella. Leaders of a Christian umbrella organization called the Chaldo-Assyrian-Syriac Front and KRG Finance Minister Sarkis Aghajan) probably the most influential Christian leader in Northern Iraq) laid out essentially the same scheme. The region nominally could answer either to the KRG or GOI, but would have its own Prime Minister, cabinet, legislature, and five percent allotment of the Iraqi budget (proportionate to what the Christians claim is their share of the Iraqi population). Its territory as Aghajan described it would consist of a thin ribbon of villages along the Ninewa-KRG border, turning eastward into Dohuk province at the Turkish border. Citizens in this scheme would vote for representatives at all levels - national, local, and regional if they join the KRG.

¶14. (C) The Christians are highly unlikely to get either as much territory as they want) it currently includes Habur Gate, the only major border crossing from Turkey into Iraq and a huge cash cow for the KRG) or five percent of the Iraq budget, since Christians probably make up less than five percent of the Iraqi population. Nonetheless, KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, a longtime friend of Aghajan, said the KRG could accept some of these demands, for example allowing Christians their own legislature and security forces under the KRG umbrella. Whether or not Christians remain under GOI authority in Ninawa or are incorporated into the KRG, the main concern is maintaining and improving their tenuous security situation in Hamdaniya. Any plan to transition Hamdaniya from current peshmerga security to GOI and local forces would require careful management to minimize threats to Christian and other minorities.

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